Softball Rules Guide

FASTPITCH SOFTBALL FOR NEW PARENTS: RULES MADE SIMPLE

Rules 8-8, 6-1 and 3-2-6, NFHS Softball Rules Book (2026 edition) Last checked Nov 1, 2026

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> **Fastpitch has a few rules you won't know from baseball. Runners can't leave the base until the pitch is released. The look-back rule makes them commit once the pitcher has the ball in the circle. The pitcher's motion has its own rules. And the DP/FLEX lets one player bat for another who only fields. Which rulebook applies depends on your daughter's league.**

If you grew up on baseball, fastpitch softball looks familiar until the first close play. Here's what's different.

WHICH RULEBOOK?

High school teams play **NFHS** rules. Travel and rec teams mostly play **USA Softball** rules, sometimes with tournament changes. Little League softball has its own rulebook. They agree on most things, and this guide notes where they don't. When a call surprises you, ask the coach which book the game is played under.

NO LEADING OFF

Runners can't leave the base until the pitcher **releases** the pitch. A runner who goes early is out, and the pitch doesn't count. That's why you'll see runners crouched like sprinters, rocking with the pitcher's motion.

THE LOOK-BACK RULE

After a play, once the pitcher has the ball **inside the circle**, any runner off her base has to go back or go on right away. She may stop once, but if she dances around, she's out. It's the call that confuses new parents most. See look-back vs. leaving early.

THE PITCHER'S MOTION

Pitchers start on the pitcher's plate, take the signal, **pause with their hands together** for 1 to 10 seconds, then deliver with one step. **Leaping is legal now**; a **crow hop** (landing, replanting and pushing off again) isn't. An illegal pitch gives the batter a ball. In high school, runners don't move up a base for it. See illegal pitches.

BATTING NINE OR TEN: DP/FLEX

Many teams list **10 players**. The **DP** (designated player) bats but may not field, and the **FLEX** fields but doesn't bat. They're linked, and when one covers the other, the lineup drops to 9. It's how a strong defensive catcher and a strong hitter can both be in the game. See the DP/FLEX rule.

COMING OUT AND GOING BACK IN

In high school and USA Softball, any player, starter or sub, can **re-enter once**, in the same spot in the batting order. Little League ties re-entry to its mandatory play rule. See re-entry.

THINGS THAT WORK LIKE BASEBALL

The **dropped third strike** works the same: she can run if first base is empty or there are two outs. See the dropped third strike. Games are **7 innings** in high school and most travel ball, and **6** in Little League's Major Division.

THE FIELD

The pitcher throws from **35 feet at 10U, 40 at 12U and 43 from 14U up**, from inside a circle 16 feet across. Bases are 60 feet apart in youth and high school fastpitch. See pitching distances.

BEING A GOOD SOFTBALL PARENT

Umpires' judgment calls (ball, strike, safe, out, illegal pitch) aren't up for debate. Coaches ask about rules, parents cheer. Bring a chair, a blanket for early spring games, and patience. Pitching takes years to learn, and so does catching it. For the words you'll hear in the stands, see softball terms.

Current as of Nov 1, 2026. Follows the NFHS Softball Rules Book, 2026 edition. Rules change: the latest version is always at **softballrulesguide.com/rules/fastpitch-for-new-parents**.

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